

**ROCKLAND**

# Police weigh hate crime charges in wake of antisemitic comments at Haverstraw meeting

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HAVERSTRAW – County, town and state officials are looking at whether a Thiells resident's antisemitic and threatening comments at a recent land-use board meeting could bring criminal or hate crime charges.

Town Supervisor Howard Phillips called the comments, by the speaker who identified himself as Nick Colella, "disgraceful and hateful remarks regarding the Orthodox community ... we want everyone to know this will not be tolerated."

Colella made the comments during a Planning Board public hearing addressing a request to convert a single-family residence into a neighborhood synagogue.

State Attorney General Letitia James has called the town to see if her office could assist in in the probe in any way, Phillips said.

Haverstraw Town police and the Rockland District Attorney's Office are discussing the probe. Colella's comments were shared in a video on Twitter. Phillips said police are seeking another video of the Nov. 10 Planning Board public hearing.

Wilbur Aldridge, regional director of the Westchester/Mid-Hudson NAACP, said it was important for law enforcement to take Colella's statements seriously. That someone believed such vile statements were OK, Aldridge said, "demonstrates the level of freedom that people who are antisemitic and racist feel they have."

Police Chief Peter Murphy said the police had not spoken with Colella yet on Friday.

## EXHIBIT 7

During his three-minute turn at the mic Wednesday night, Colella made several comments about the growing Orthodox Jewish community in the Thiells-Pomona-Garnerville portion of the town.

At one point, Colella threatened violence against the members of the Orthodox community by saying if they were walking in the road at night, not wearing reflectors, and if he was to hit them with his vehicle, he would “of course back over them again.”

## **Convert a house to a synagogue**

The public hearing focused on a proposed site plan by Congregation K’hal Bnei Torah of Mount Ivy for 62 Riverglen Drive in Thiells, a hamlet in the town. The owners of the property, now a single-family house, have been seeking variances to convert the building to a synagogue.

The owners want to add a second floor to the 3,576-square-foot house, which is located on 1.217 acres. The expansion would bring the building's square footage to 8,202. The plans also call for adding 27 off-street parking spaces.

Colella is registered as an owner of a home on the same street.

Like the streets in the surrounding neighborhood of mostly Colonial-style single-family homes, Riverglen Drive does not have sidewalks.

Rockland County Legislator Michael Grant on Friday lauded the actions of Planning Board Chair Salvatore Corallo, who shut down Colella during Wednesday's meeting.

After Colella tried to continue, Corallo said, “No, no, you’re finished!”

Christie Todd Addona, the town’s land-use attorney, told Colella: “Time is up, sir!” She told him, “Please go sit down ... we’re done.”

About 130 people attended the Planning Board public hearing. No action was planned on the proposal that night, Phillips said, because the plan needs the Zoning Board of Appeals to consider variances.

## **Kids ask if it's safe outside**

Phillips called Colella's comments dangerous and inciteful.

"Haverstraw has always been a true melting pot of all cultures and religions," Phillips said. "We have never tolerated hate speech in any form."

Collin Dunner of Garnerville said he would use the synagogue, which would be located close enough to walk to on the Sabbath and holidays. He said that the words Colella said did not reflect his experience living as an Orthodox Jew in the town for the last five years. Dunner said his experience with neighbors has been fine and kids play together.

After Wednesday's meeting, Dunner said, his kids asked if it was safe to play outside.

"I am heartbroken that in my community people would feel comfortable saying that kind of thing," Dunner said. "All of us have been shocked at his language."

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Aldridge, a West Haverstraw resident, said it was "so vile and so inconceivable that someone would even think" to say, as Colella did, that he would back up over someone. "That is as inhumane as one could possibly think. It's got to be deeper rooted than the opening of a synagogue or permission for a parking lot."

Phillips said Gov. Kathy Hochul had reached out to his office to offer any support. She also said that she knows Rockland, Phillips said, and that the man's actions didn't reflect the community.

The governor on Thursday night tweeted: "I have heard reports of violent rhetoric towards our Jewish community at a town meeting in Rockland County. Antisemitism, like all forms of hate, is horrifying and unacceptable. Everyone has the right to walk down the street without fear. New York, we are better than this."

Ramapo Town Supervisor Michael Specht, state Sen. James Skoufis and Rockland County Executive Ed Day also condemned the comments.

"It has always been our strength that we've had a population of all different backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities," Phillips said. "This is just another phase in our history and Haverstraw will always have an open-door policy of all people."

Phillips added: "We're the town that had the first synagogue, Sons of Jacob, the first Roman Catholic church, St. Peter's, the first African-American church, Calvary Baptist, in Rockland County. We're no strangers to religious diversity."

*Nancy Cutler writes about People & Policy. Click here for her latest stories. Follow her on Twitter at @nancyrockland.*